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ABSTRACT

A policy system design that can benefit from the dynamics of small group behavior without suffering from the adverse effects associated with group thinking, in which the members of small groups acquire a concurrence seeking tendency, is comprised of three subsystem functions: (1) a sub-system normative function which requires that small groups be assigned to ensure that an agency persist while it undergoes elaboration to confront changing internal and external conditions; (2) a sub-system strategic function which requires small groups to act on transforming the "ideal ends" resulting from goal formulations to the most "feasible means" for their realization; and (3) a sub-system tactical function which requires small groups to operationalize the policy goals and objectives in concrete applications. The concepts of policy system design integrate the social interaction of small groups and the systems interaction of the policy subsystem functions. (JAC)

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Dynamics of Small Group Policy Bodies

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Dynamics of Small Group Policy Bodies

I. Introduction

The main purpose of this paper is to construct a policy system design that can benefit from the dynamics of small group behavior witnout suffering from the adverse effects associated with group thinking in which the members of small groups acquire a "concurrence seeking tendency."[1]

Our policy system design comprises three sub-system functions: (1) a sub-system normative function requires that small groups be assigned to ensure that an agency persist while it undergoes elaboration to confront changing internal and external conditions; (2) a sub-system strategic function requires small groups to act on transforming the "ideal ends" resulting from goal formulations to the most "feasible means" for their realization; (3) a sub-system tactical function requires small groups to operationalize the policy goals and objectives in concrete applications.[2] Running parallel to these sub-system functions are critical stages in policy development in which small groups are given specific assignments.

Two critical postulates underlie this policy system design: (1) the greater the sub-system coalescence (i.e., horizontal and vertical linkages) in achieving functional outcomes, the greater degree of policy integration of small group behavior between the stages of development and the greater the social interactional process within each small group; (2) the greater the behavioral patterns and relations (i.e., interrelations) between small groups assigned to the various stages of policy development, the greater the opportunity exist for expressing multiple values and diverse interest. Both postulates decrease the predispositions that generate "groupthinking" while increasing the possibilities for policy system integration.

A small group, comprising five to seven members, will evolve from their social interactions with common values, interests and beliefs. However, it is

through a participation and contribution in policy that the system's internal referents will be superimposed on a small groups interactional field. The inevitable goal directed behavior of small groups becomes purposeful to the ends of a policy system's normative pursuits.[3]

Our policy system design also accepts the axiom that small groups are co-producers to the essential stages of a policy system; that they create in synthesis interaction, final outcomes for the policy system that are different from each small group activity taken independently. Our policy system design is predicated on the proposition that a disideratum (i.e., purposeful policy goal behavior) "sweeps in" the parochial perspectives of small group idiosyncracies. This is achieved by raising the level of small group performance to transcend the immediate into more advanced, generalized and abstract levels of policy competence.[4]

It is propitious to examine these postulates by first drawing distinctions between social and system interactive fields. We can then demonstrate how the dynamics of small group behavior, within a systems construct, converges these "fields" into policy system integration. This task also involves describing and identifying the significance of policy sub-system functions. We are principally interested in how they evolve through the stages of policy development. Finally, our design will demonstrate how the stages in policy development, and their accompanying processes, serve as linkages between sub-system functions and between the different stages of development itself.

II. Social and System Interaction

There are conditions that govern the creation of a social interactional field, conducive to this design and certainly to individual member's willingness to participate, contribute and cooperate. A critical assumption is if these qualities can be achieved, then the policy system acquires small group commitment to the system's desired goals. Each member of a small group to one degree or another,

must conclude the following: (1) that the energy (viewed in relation to time and cost) expended in the group is "worth" it in fulfilling an individual's values; (2) that the individual's participation and contribution counts in effecting the course and direction of the policy; and (3) that the small group policy body is the only, most expeditious and productive process by which individuals can satisfy their values.[5] These criteria can serve as a broad basis to ascertain and appraise agency commitment as well as a basis to anticipate policy outcomes.

Some of these conditions are met by assigning to small groups policy tasks that are associated with their individual and group roles in the agency. The organization assigns roles and behavioral expectations (i.e., job descriptions, performance expectations, etc.) that set the stage for establishing both formal and informal common values for social interaction. These roles can be transferred and accentuated when activated in policy goal directed behavior. Opportunity to effect the course and direction of an agency provides additional incentives and motivation for commitment. It is however, our supposition that the emergence of a social interactive field, necessary for this policy design, can only be realized through a climate conducive to human creative rational action.

Interactions between policy sub-systems is realized through the interdependence and interrelations of their functions in which each effects and is effected by the other in a complex web of information flow and exchanges. If we accept this supposition, then it follows that this system design views policy as both a determinant and as a consequence of small group decision making in development. Each sub-system function, with its accompanying small groups, are in continuous interaction with one another through social and system interactive behavior.[6]

Let us now summarize what we mean by a social and system interactive field that strives towards an integrative policy system. Social interaction is concerned with the policy system on the level of face to face contact--a reciprocity

between individual members of a small group in which it is anticipated that behavioral relations and patterns for that group will emerge. System interaction is concerned with how the policy system is organized in its sub-system functions which is seen as collectiveness--a reciprocity of small groups. Our policy system design generates horizontal and vertical information within and between small groups and sub-systems in which the various stages of development and their intermediary processes serve as linkages.

III. Sub-system Interaction

As noted, this policy system design recognizes and nurtures individual and group values, interests and beliefs while it concurrently strives for their convergence in an overarching conceptualization of purpose and direction.

Let us examine sub-system functions as a means to explicate the significance of these suppositions.

(1) Normative Pursuits

All agencies must periodically examine their purpose and meaning for existence if for no other reason, than to confront the inevitable changing internal and external social environments. Policy problems are constantly being structured and restructured to meet existing and emerging human and social needs. A viable agency must engage in policy forecasting as a means of exploring desireable ends and feasible means to solve or resolve a policy problem. Forecasting is the process that links the structuring of a policy problem with the identified formulation of policy alternatives. This is identified as a normative policy planning sub-system function. Small groups are assigned the tasks of predicting, projecting and when confronted with "wicked" policy problems, conjecturing in syllogisms more desirable and feasible future states.[7]

(2) Strategic Pursuits

Hypothesized "ideal ends" would be highly teleological if there was no basis in social reality. Conjectures (i.e., alternatives) must be transformed and activated into more operational terms. Hence, forecasting alternative policies are linked to actions through a strategic function of recommending decisions that are perceived to be most feasible given the current state of affairs. Small groups are given the assignment of recommending policy actions in which a variety of decision models are available. Models are chosen principally in relation to the policy problem and its perceived ends. The key is to ascertain feasibilities towards achieving desired ends in a very complex social reality.

(3) Tactical Pursuits

Our policy system is designed to automatically evolve from a deductive/intuitive process (i.e., hypothetico-deductive) to that of an empirical/inductive process (i.e., direct observables).[8] The recommended policy actions are organized, managed and planned to be operationalized in concrete situations. Policy actions lead to specific outcomes which in our designs are monitored to ensure that the outputs are in line with the policy values as expressed in goals and secondly, to determine if the outputs are indeed impacting on the target group they were intended. Monitoring policy actions through inquiry of the system's outcomes is perceived as a self appraisal and self-renewal process. Internal and external changes are necessary feedbacks to small groups responsible for "hypothesizing ideal ends and feasible means for action." Hence, policy outcomes leads to an evaluation of overall performance--empirical verification of a disideratum and its system design.

The processes of forecasting, recommending, monitoring and evaluation provide the linkages between the various stages of policy development (i.e., structuring policy problems, forecasting policy actions, recommending policy actions

and evaluation policy outcomes). The sub-system functions provide the internal referents by which these small groups are given direction for decision making (i.e., normative, strategic and tactical decision making). Each small group is given a specific assignment within the purview of the processes and stages for policy development. As such, each small group irrespective of its sub-system referents or small group assignment to a stage in policy development, impacts on the purpose and direction of the system design. The coalescence of sub-system functions that necessitates by design, reciprocity, inevitably results in a mutual information exchange between small groups to achieve systems integration. It is further advanced that this degree of interdependence and interrelations serves as defense against elitism that has the potential to emerge in each of the sub-systems (i.e., scientism in futurism, technocrats in strategic information control and professionalism in operationalizing services).

IV. Small Groups in Policy Development

A critical characteristic of our policy system design is that information generated by each small group effects the decision making in all other small groups and hence, the degree to which sub-system functions are met. The final outcomes of a policy system is therefore different from the separate actions taken by each small group. Further, our policy system design is cyclical in that there is no one place to begin (i.e., causal) to produce a final end (i.e., finality). Small group policy bodies can initiate change from anywhere in the system. A final end (i.e., disideratum) can be initiated, pursued and realized from different locations in the sub-system configuration.

Our policy system design creates an intellectual climate highly conducive to generating ideas, encouraging critical actions, inventing new systems through innovations and experimentations. Although each small group is assigned to sub-system functions on different levels of complexity (i.e., from normative pursuits

to concrete applications) each small group is expected to be involved in human creative rational decision making (i.e., decisions that create institutions, instrumentalities and operations).

A number of pitfalls are possible in each stage of policy development. A small group can choose the wrong conceptualization for a policy problem (i.e., poverty is conceptualized through the basic and derived concepts of economics) when in fact, poverty is the product of a number of interdependent social problems. Or a small group takes a substantive policy and formulates the wrong specifications for a formal policy statement. For example, specifying a policy parameter based on previous events and occurrences when past experience should be re-structured to confront contemporary problems relative to future actions. If the wrong conceptualization of a policy problem is an error of the first kind and specifying the substantive policy is an error of the second kind, then solving the wrong problem in the first place is an error of the third kind.[9]

It is the degree to which a small group's values, interests and beliefs dominate the conceptualization and specification of structuring policy problems that will determine errors of the first, second or third kind. This is always accompanied by the extent to which the original structuring of the problem is restructured as the policy's goals and its design change in development. Our policy system design begins with value choices expressed in hypothesized "ideal ends" but under the condition that information will be exchanged between small groups deciding in different stages of policy development. Hence, it would be adviseable to have members from other small groups contribute and participate to the structuring and restructuring of policy problems.

There is an innate tendency on the part of small group policy bodies, engaged in forecasting policy alternatives, to automatically take the existing policies as a given; specify goals and objectives as an extension of past policies. The result is a policy alternative that is marginal and dependent upon the established value

system of the agency. There are times when small group policy bodies must promote and protect existing policies. But the agency's continued existence is contingent upon its elaboration in meeting changing internal and external conditions. Our policy system is designed to avoid small group decision making that offers ad hoc, expedient and "quick fixes." Our policy system emphasizes conjectures; that is, forecasting policy alternatives in normative values rather than in predictions and projections based on past experiences. This does not exclude the use of experience. However, it is placed on a temporal continuum in which the present is better understood in relation to planning for the future.

Small groups assigned to policy actions, a stage in policy development, are expected to swing the deductive/intuitive syllogisms into empirical/inductive decisions for action. A small group is therefore, in the critical position of giving meaning and intent to policy through concrete recommendations for operations. Hence, the implementation of policy is no less policy making than the original formulation of goals and objectives. This notion enhances our position for system interaction--interpretation and discretionary actions link policy formulation (i.e., policy is a determinate) to policy implementation (i.e., policy is a consequence of invariant discretionary decisions).

There is an inherent tendency to transform a policy into concrete actions in ways that almost exclusively reflect the values, interests and beliefs of the small group given the assignment. If a group is highly professional and technical in its composition and orientation, the tendency is to interpret policy through the prisms of logic and rationality. Decisions are rational, very efficient and effectively perceived to maximize a policy goal. If the same group however, perceives decision making as adapting a social agency to the external social environmental changes that is causing the need for policy, the tendency is to recommend policies that are reactive and remedial. Each small group must be aware of the

array of value choices available in the selection of a decision model. The choice cannot be incongruent or diametrically opposed to decisions made in the structuring of the policy problem, and with forecasting policy alternatives. If so, then the policy problem must be restructured and new alternatives formulated.

If recommendations for policy actions are fragmented, incongruent and inconsistent with the internal referents of the policy system, they will be reflected in policy outcomes--the succeeding stage of policy development. As a means of anticipating changes, desireable or otherwise, monitoring processes should be put in place for the following reasons: for value clarification; for the determination of value premises that underlie recommendations that guide choices. In essence, can a small group policy body provide a rationale that justifies its recommendations? This can be achieved through a monitoring and control process that generates internal and external information exchanges through formal feedback methods (i.e., social auditing, social system accounting, etc.) and through small group member exchanges. Recommending policy actions is a stage in development that highlights the importance for small group policy bodies to be knowledgeable in systems tools and techniques as well as information technology.

A small group assigned to evaluating policy outcomes must in the first instance, respond to the question what difference did the agency's policy make? As noted in the other stages of policy development, there exist a host of value premises that underlie the responses to this question. Nor for that matter is this the only question that can be asked by a small group involved in evaluating policy outcomes. In fact, our policy design would require that the questions for ascertaining and appraising policy outcomes include normatives--What should be done now in the course of actions? What ought to be done over the long run? This would also include more basic questions as to what facts do we have that the policy as formulated continues to exist?[10] Here again, as in the case of

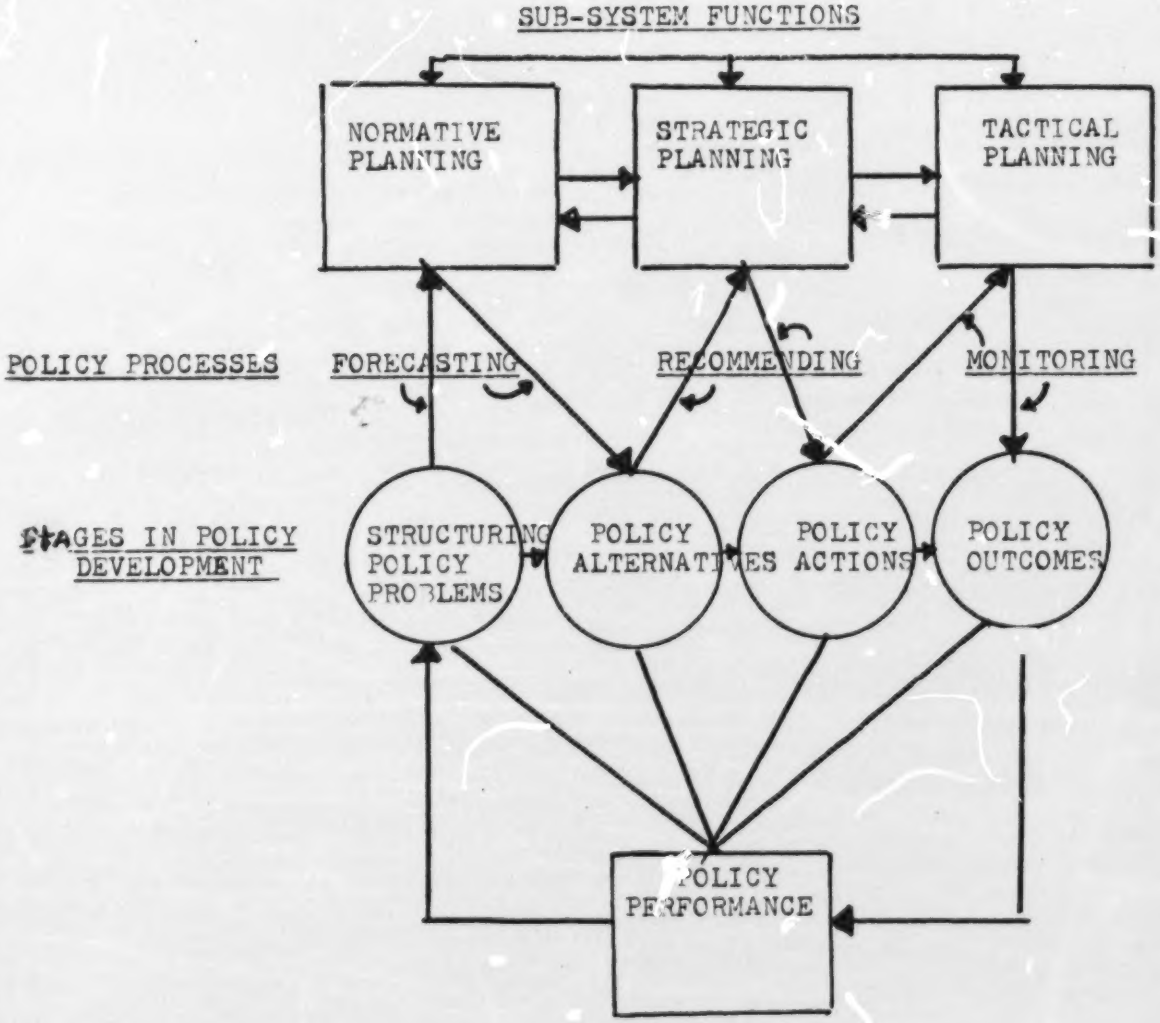
structuring the policy problem, asking the right questions avoids the pitfalls of useless erroneous policy appraisals. Secondly, if our policy design is both deductive/intuitive and empirical/inductive, then the system of inquiry must be such to "sweep-in" the parochial perspectives implicit to the kinds of evaluations pursued (i.e., pragmatism, operationism and normativism).

V. Summary

Let us now summarize some of the ways in which a policy system can benefit from the dynamics of small group policy bodies.

The postulates, basic and derived concepts of a policy system design serve to integrate the social interaction of small groups as it does the systems interaction of the policy sub-system functions. Each small group is organized and managed so as to be innovative, creative and experimental in arriving at decisions in the various stages of policy development irrespective of their assignments and location in meeting the sub-system functions. Each small group policy body is expected to acquire and utilize information that is derived from preceding and succeeding stages in the policy process. Hence, small groups interact with all the processes "in and about" policy formulation and implementation. The continuous flow of policy information requires that small group policy bodies interact under continuous internal and external changing conditions. Even though the policy design builds in its own control processes, it remains critical that opportunity be presented for sharing in the deliberations of different small groups. In fact, the intermittent exchange of small group members should be mandatory.

Our policy system design attempts to involve everyone in the agency interested and willing to participate and contribute to the policy process.


SUB-SYSTEM FUNCTIONS
NORMATIVE PLANNING
STRATEGIC PLANNING
TACTICAL PLANNING
POLICY PROCESSES
FORECASTING
RECOMMENDING
MONITORING
STAGES IN POLICY DEVELOPMENT
STRUCTURING POLICY PROBLEMS
POLICY ALTERNATIVES
POLICY ACTIONS
POLICY OUTCOMES
POLICY PERFORMANCE

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